

Remarks
Ambassador D. Brent Hardt
Launch of a National Conversation on Domestic Violence
June 27, 2012
Georgetown, Guyana

His Excellency Prime Minister Hinds, the Honorable Chancellor of the Judiciary Carl Singh, the Honorable Minister of Human Services and Social Security Jennifer Webster, other Ministers of Government, Members of Parliament, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Representatives of Civil Society, Members of the Media, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am pleased to be with you here today at this timely forum to raise awareness of and find solutions to the global scourge of domestic violence. This is a critical national conversation, and the United States appreciates the opportunity to be part of it. We commend the Government of Guyana for this initiative. There is no doubt that Prime Minister Hinds' presence today, together with the presence of so many Members of Cabinet, sends an important signal of the Government's and the President's commitment to confront the epidemic of domestic

violence that has seemed to grip the country in recent months. This issue merits the highest priority and the highest level of national attention.

We are also pleased that the Government is working closely with civil society groups to build awareness of the affront to human rights posed by domestic violence and violence against women and children.

There have been many tangible efforts by both the Government and civil society organizations to address domestic violence, including the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Offences Act; the establishment of the Men's Affairs Bureau and the Domestic Violence Policy Unit; provision of support services for victims of violence; and public awareness efforts.

We hope that the Government, the private sector, and international partners will enhance their support to these vital civil society groups such as Red Thread, Help and Shelter and religious organizations that

are doing so much on the ground, day in and day out to help those in need.

As the epidemic of domestic violence has intensified, we have been left to ponder how the many brutal actions we read about in the morning papers or see on the evening news can affect women, children, society, the economy, and our spiritual well-being. Exposure to domestic violence puts our young men and women in danger of long-term physical, psychological, and emotional harm. We know that children who experience domestic violence are at a higher risk for failure in school, emotional disorders, and substance abuse, and are more likely to perpetuate the cycle of violence themselves later in life.

Despite the fact that domestic violence is receiving increasing attention, overcoming the epidemic of gender-based violence will prove to be a difficult, long-term challenge, but one well-worth all of our efforts and our persistence. When women are abused, the abuse has socio-economic effects on all of society: it undermines gender equality, affects public health, hinders education of young people, and leaves

lasting psychological scars on children who witness the abuse, often creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. Gender-based violence is a global pandemic that cuts across all borders and all races, socio-economic groups, and religions. We must therefore face up to this issue on the international, national, and local levels and encourage greater involvement from all elements of civil society.

The United States strongly supports efforts worldwide to combat domestic violence. We speak out on this issue in all countries and in international forums. We work to build awareness. And we seek to support and lend a helping hand to those who are taking action. We are committed to working with the Government of Guyana and with Guyanese civil society groups to help address this issue.

Last year our Embassy participated in a series of activities that formed “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign.”

In 2010, the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), provided grants to three Civil Society Organizations to implement domestic violence issue-based activities. The activities included training of local officials to deal with domestic violence, the promotion of domestic violence court protocols, improved counseling services for victims and abusers, and public outreach to strengthen understanding of the rights of victims of violence.

Through another USAID grant, the Roadside Baptist Church was able support the establishment of BeMAN - a Men's Forum in Region 6 which seeks to increase the awareness of men to attitudinal and behavioral issues and encourage and equip them with knowledge and skills to become agents of change. It is vital to support the inclusion of men and boys in addressing and preventing violence and changing gender norms and attitudes.

Last January, the Embassy actively participated in the WITNESS Project – a grassroots campaign to build awareness on domestic violence. Launched by the U.S.-based Margaret Clemons Foundation,

the WITNESS Project engaged talented Guyanese youth to take photographs that became the basis of a city-wide poster campaign that sought to spark conversations on domestic violence and send a clear message: children are the most vulnerable and impressionable witnesses of domestic violence.

Last weekend, we joined together with the Sonia Noel Foundation for the Creative Arts to host a fashion show to build awareness on domestic violence in Guyana and to support Help and Shelter – an outstanding civil organization that, as everyone here knows, serves as a support network and offers a place of refuge for victims of abuse.

Later today, my wife will be meeting with students at a school in Parika on this issue, following a talk she gave earlier this week at the Marion Academy. I am pleased to see so many young people here today; they are a vital part of this conversation.

It is our hope that through today's conversation, we can identify creative ways to reach the whole of society in addressing this key human rights issue. We must find ways to educate citizens to reject violence,

encourage non-violent behaviors, and address entrenched societal beliefs and attitudes that foster them. Let us commit ourselves to working together to create a sustained national focus and take steps to turn the tide against domestic violence.

Thank you.